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“Politics of Identity Formation: Impact Of Jean Paul Sartre’s
Criticism Of Négritude Philosophy”

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Politics of Identity Formation: Impact Of Jean Paul Sartre's Criticism Of Négritude Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper undertakes an analysis of Jean Paul Sartre's "Black Orpheus" in context of the Négritude movement to understand its impact on creating a distinct identity for Africa and its diaspora. The extant literature surrounding the subject has raised questions about the impetus for the stirring of Négritude; the pre-colonial representation of Africa that the poets and political leaders of the time wanted to revolt against. The movement was not only philosophical but also had literary underpinnings, creating questions about the role and personal vested interests of French-assimilated poets, politicians and thinkers. Criticisms of Négritude are in abundance. However, a gap exists in identifying the central disparities within popular works of literature of the movement, especially the literature that was considered to be the foundation of the movement. One of these was "Black Orpheus", a foreword to Léopold Sédar Senghor's anthology of poems by the most renowned writers of Négritude. This article undertakes a rhetorical criticism, textual analysis and discourse analysis to study Sartre's text. Sartre's work is considered an important contribution, however, contrary to existing research, Sartre's work subverts the paradigm he set out to dispute. He attempts to place Négritude within the larger class struggle in Europe and is on a quest for a concise definition of the movement. Frantz Fanon and Wole Soyinka, other prominent Black thinkers and theorists of the time, dispute Sartre's romantic descriptions of the struggles and history of Africa. Upon further analysis, Senghor's poetry also reveals themes of evoking Africa's traditional mystical past, thus harping on Sartre's sentimental commentary. A culmination of study of these thinkers concludes that "Black Orpheus" falls into the same trap of homogenizing Africa while remaining ignorant of its intellectual capacities and contributions.

KEYWORDS: Négritude, African Identity, Existentialism, Post-colonialism, Eurocentrism, Diaspora

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The quest for an African identity has been a constant debate in an array of discourses. The Négritude movement emerged almost a century ago, but its vibrations are still felt in present day literature and culture. Aimé Césaire, Léon-Gontran Damas, and Léopold Sédar Senghor were all important figures in the movement, yet had different interpretations of it. Négritude developed as a movement to reclaim the term 'nègre' to fight against French colonization. Through the use of pamphlets, circulars and discussions it materialized into a revolutionary movement. "Césaire and Damas put more emphasis on the dimension of poetic revolt, while Senghor insisted more on articulating Négritude" (Diagne 1) as a philosophy, as "the sum total of the values of civilization of the Black World" (Diagne 1).

The multitude of approaches, interpretations and criticisms culminate in different schools of thought on themes of race, class, and identity. These can be witnessed in the poetry written on African Liberation movements, which reflect colonial agonies in their sociopolitical and historical contexts. Critical evaluations of Négritude by Frantz Fanon and Jean Paul Sartre have given rise to concepts of anti-Négritude movements along with new forms of Black activism. Sartre talks about the movement as a "political and poetic innovation" (Jules-Rosette 270), suggesting a de-racialized society. He "praised Négritude as the revolutionary poetry of the time" (Diagne 1), believing that it was plausible as a literary movement only. This counters Wole Soyinka's beliefs that the intrinsic principles of movement are erroneous. These two arguments contradict each other, sparking debate about their validity. According to Feuser, "Black Orpheus" is probably the most important single source of Négritude poetry for Nigerian and other Anglophone undergraduates" (559), which makes it extremely important to study. Although the eurocentrism of Sartre's work is undeniable, it nonetheless shapes the movement, regardless of its form and nature.

In addition, Fanon's contrasting arguments on race and class by Sartre lead to a muddled sense of identity. This gives rise to a series of questions rather than a framework of solutions, for

a more holistic, unified African identity and sense of being. Furthermore, Senghor's articulation of the movement sculpts Africa as a homogenised society, the same trap that the colonizers fell into when they killed all plurality.

In the current globalised world, traces of colonial prejudices and the white gaze are still deeply rooted in society. Literary and ideological movements are continuous, and their relevance universal. These contrasting debates and theories give rise to the research question: To what extent does Sartre's criticism of Négritude philosophy create a distinct identity for Africans?

Literature Review

The vast literature available on this topic has been divided into themes for a deeper understanding of the research question. This will help break down the facets associated with Sartre's criticism of Négritude philosophy, and the creation of an identity for Africans. After a discussion on each of the themes, an overview of the existing gaps in literature has been provided.

Pre-historical Colonial Representation of Africa

It is crucial to understand the colonial representation of Africans as it provides a window into the ways in which colonizers divided, plotted, and ruled their colonies, illuminating the factors which led to a multitude of revolutionary movements. A central justification for the colonization of the African continent was the allegation that it had no contribution or offering to the white man's world, and hence had no future either. These claims were propagated by the thinkers and theorists who understood these prejudiced arguments within the context of their environments.

Hegel considered aspects such as geography and climate as determinants of human nature. He stated that:

... neither the torrid nor the cold region can provide a basis for human freedom or for world-historical nations. Africa was to be found in the torrid region, the consequence of which was that it was historically without significance. The fiery heat of the continent was a natural force far too powerful for the spirit to achieve free movement and to reach that degree of richness which is the precondition and source of a fully developed mastery of reality (Jacques 3).

In Hegel's mind, Africa was composed of "Negroes," making it 'black' Africa, but in actuality it was merely a result of climatic and geographic conditions. This racial discrimination and social hierarchy, on the basis on skin colour, was thus justified in his mind (Jacques 3).

According to Amilcar Cabral's *National Liberation and Culture*, colonizers had not only repressed culture, but also created an alienation from it. This was done through the means of assimilation, the creation of social inequality, and a sense of cultural superiority amongst the bourgeoisie, all based on skin colour. Assimilation was not used to uplift Africa, but was used instead, to devalue their culture, first through slavery, and then colonial rule. Africans were "stripped of their true cultural self and put on a foreign one which was later to be revolted against" (Onwumere 150).

Engleberg Mveng, a Cameroonian author and theologian, asserts that "Africa is not taken seriously ...Africa remains the everlasting marginalized ...continent (Clark 72). Fanon further

contextualized this in regards to colonialism. He explained that “colonialism was not content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated people” (Clark 74), and that it aims to “distort, disfigure and destroy” (74) the past of the oppressed culture. In addition to this, the tradition of orality in Africa led to an absence of tangible documentation of history and evidence. Alioune Diop concluded, “Nothing in their past is of any value. Neither customs nor culture. These natives are asked to take on the customs, the logic, the language of the colonizer, from whom they even have to borrow their ancestors” (Irele 513). The Haitian writer Emmanuel Paul further drew on this and stated “It was from this [African] past that colonial authors undertook to make the black man inferior” (515).

In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire reasoned that colonialism results in the massive destruction of whole societies, and causes “racial Othering.” Historian Robin Kelley furthered this argument, stating, “The colonial encounter... requires a reinvention of the colonized, the deliberate destruction of her past. Once reinvented, the colonized were defined through categories (primitive, savage, irrational and barbaric) that excluded them from respectable discourse” (Clark 74).

These feelings stirred for decades and generations, while the voices of Black communities, intellectuals, and writers were stifled by the transatlantic slave trade and Berlin Conference 1884-85. However, feelings of revolution were sparking constantly, and there emerged a need for “a process of self-appraisal and self-definition” (Irele 515). It is important to recognize, though, that this need for “self definition” did not yield a “common cultural denominator” (515) but that there was a “significance... in the attitude that inspired [revolutionary movements]” (515). Therefore, to directly respond to the cultural policies imposed by the colonizers, “Négritude developed into a vindication and an exaltation of cultural institutions which were different from those of the west; it was thus a conscious attitude of pluralism” (515).

Négritude Philosophy

This characteristic pluralism of the movement makes it necessary to decode the multiple understandings of Négritude in order to critically examine its position in creating an identity. The Négritude movement was created by “Francophone Africans who were responding to stiff, dehumanizing, and cultural and religious disorienting policy of French assimilation” (Onwumere 150). It emerged as a creation of a collective racial identity in a modern world where the community “had thought nothing, built nothing, painted nothing, sang nothing; in sum, that they were nothing” (Jacques 4).

To counter the aforementioned colonial representation of Africa and Black people, Négritude culminated as a movement and ideology. Négritude defied colonial imaginings of Africa by helping legitimize Black identity and beauty, and empowered them to fight so as to be recognised and respected. “Négritude invited Blacks to participate in an identity broader than ones previously available through kinship, ethnicity and race” (Clark 74). This enabled the creation of what Benedict Anderson referred to as “imagined communities” in which a binding emotional and psychological affinity transcended nationality, language and economic circumstances (74). Overall, a larger movement was created based on a shared sense of history and ancestry.

These aspects of ancestry, return, and history aimed to establish a collective identity. Césaire’s *Return to the Native Land* served as a symbol for uniting based on the idea of a common origin. Négritude became a movement to unite the imagined African community “that

transcends ethnic, religious and national affiliation” to create a “language of resistance to [counter] stereotypes of the African savage” (76). As Négritude became a prominent liberationist movement, multiple perspectives developed to define it. Some schools of thought termed it a “nativist philosophy” (73) that provided justifications for imperialism. Others considered it a means of “recover[ing] African traditional values and vernaculars in service to the struggle for liberation” (73).

Senghor believed that Négritude did not disappear in the formation of a universal civilization, but formed a crucial part of it. Universal civilisation, according to Senghor, does not demand the negation of black particularity; rather, black particularity enriches and is a necessary part of universal civilisation (77) (Négritude, in this context refers to the philosophical concept as put forth by Senghor).

This needs to be differentiated “from other efforts to rehabilitate Africa by what can be termed its ethnological aspect, which attempted to redefine its terms, and to re-evaluate Africa within a non-western framework. Here the concept of cultural relativity was to help...establish the validity of African cultural forms in their own right” (Irele 514).

These statements set forth a need to study African identities without placing the West as a frame of reference, but instead evaluate their self-perception. It needs to be studied as “the expression of a justified self-assertion swelling into an exaggerated self-consciousness...that meant to a considerable extent an assiduous cultivation of the black race” (517). These themes and expressions also need to be contextualized in the social and political events of the 1950s and 1960s, such as the political elections in Senegal.

Sociopolitical Context

While the movement had three founding fathers, it is imperative to establish why Senghor’s philosophical interpretation is selected for the study. Senghor was considered the “herald and emblem” (Kesteloot and Kennedy 51) of the Négritude movement. Research by Mabana establishes that in his works, ranging from his first collection of poems titled *Chants d’ombre*, to the last volume of *Liberté*, he has been the “theoretical supporter” and “main frontrunner of the movement” (4). He can even be considered to have alone “incarnated alone the destiny of the Négritude movement” (Mabana 10). However, he did not earn this title by merely founding the movement, or by the immediate acclamation it brought him; these feelings brewed over decades, since Senghor’s childhood.

Since school, Senghor had been aware of colonization and French assimilation. He took it upon himself to create his own framework and conceptual system using tools he learned from the study of disciplines such as “ethnology, linguistics, sociology, philosophy” (6). In addition to this, Marxist ideologies, existentialism, Afro-American literature, and spirituality shaped Senghor’s worldviews about the position of Black civilization vis-à-vis the West (6). This shows how intrinsic the need for liberation and creating an African identity is to Senghor’s being. Despite this position, he has been criticised for being politically motivated. He has been accused of using the movement’s ideology for personal political gain, to lead up to his presidency, where Senegal’s Francophonie was used to position the country alongside European cultural and linguistic organisations. This has led to a revaluation of the philosophy and its principles. Kesteloot and Kennedy accurately summarize the opposing stances taken by Senghor:

Senghor’s discourse idealized the nature of African cultures, emphasizing only their positive aspects. The everyday Senghor, in contrast, reasoned and negotiated with

extraordinary realism over the broad range of his countrymen's most contradictory and doubtful instincts (Kesteloot and Kennedy 52).

Contextualizing the movement in the sociopolitical environment of that period is essential to understand the role of political motivations, biases, or theories of assimilation in building the literature of philosophy. Hence, "to uncover the African in Senghor, one needs only to look a little deeper into the role of the imagination in his poems, at the play of sounds, the cultural references" (52).

Literature of Négritude

The Négritude movement was formulated in multiple ways, but its representation in literature is significant. The importance of literature can be summarized succinctly:

Literature reflects and refracts the goings on in the societies, using whichever languages are obtainable and adequate for such human groupings. For this reason, in every human community across the ages, literature has been elevated to a very high pedestal and assigned the noble and major role of educating man right from his infancy thus helping him to appreciate and perpetuate the norms and values of his race or social group as well as fulfil himself (Ayeleru 166).

It is termed a literary movement as it manifests in forms such as poetry, stories, folk tales to achieve its goals; art serves as activism (Galafa 290). On the whole, "Western language and culture presented as factors of uprooting and alienation constitute one of the motifs of the Négritude poets" (Kesteloot and Kennedy 54). Therefore, it is important to first establish the broad underlying themes before deconstructing and analyzing the deeper underlying intricacies in literature. Taken together, these themes constitute a national literature that challenges Western hegemony.

Fanon titled this "literature of combat," as it took up the responsibility of creating a national consciousness. This literature is characterized by its use of allusion, the naming of heroes and their tools of struggle, and the modernization of conflict, acknowledging ongoing struggles instead of labelling them incidents of the past. (Fanon 239). This leads to a wide range of the imagination of storytellers who de-dramatize their stories, making the struggle accessible to the masses and not confined to intellectuals (Fanon 240). Despite this, there is a common mistake made by writers and thinkers of the movement, which is to find "cultural expressions for and to give new values to native culture within the framework of colonial domination" (Fanon 243). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon accurately summarizes how poets dichotomize Africa and Europe:

The poets of Négritude oppose the idea of an old Europe to a young Africa, tiresome reasoning to lyricism, oppressive logic to high-stepping nature, and on one side stiffness, ceremony, etiquette, and scepticism, while on the other frankness, liveliness, liberty, and luxuriance: but also, irresponsibility (Fanon 212).

Aime Césaire's poem *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* addresses the "physical and psychological brutality of the colonial administration" (Anderson 83) which gave rise to "feelings of inferiority and self-hatred" (84) among natives. The poem further articulates the

insatiable need to re-establish and re-grasp the past and make the world anew (84). This is an important work to study as it paints a bleak picture of hopelessness and poverty, and Césaire's inability to provide a solution. The poem uses metaphor to convey colonial grief. An analysis of it will enable a better understanding of the themes explored in Senghor's poetry on Négritude. However, the literature of the movement is not merely limited to Senghor's works. Abiola Irele's *Négritude- Literature and Ideology* provides an in-depth study of themes not only in the works of the fathers of the movement, but also in the works of other pioneers such as Roussan Cami, Bloke Modisane, and Leon Laleau. Analyzing themes in literature of a broader range of writers and poets will provide a broader understanding of the general attitude of the movement. Irele mentioned the dilemma of the situation of the "assimilated Negro intellectual" (Irele 501), and the estrangement and alienation one faced when it came to serving the colonizers, or representing their culture and kin. Furthermore, Irele delved into how literature becomes a form of "testimony to the injustices of colonial rule" where the author's "tone changes often from menace to one of accusation" (505).

Traces of literary reversal, similar to Nietzsche's work on nihilism, are present in Damas' work (507). This highlights the book *Nihilism and Négritude*, a text that provides an awareness of the prevalent and developing philosophy in Africa. The author expands on the absurdity of everyday actions which serve as a form of nihilism to cope with the existing poverty, corruption and poor social conditions. This speaks to the multiple perspectives from which Africa is written about. The inclusion of daily life and stories helps break down stereotypes about Africa, themes which can also be identified in Senghor's poetry.

Irele's statement that "the way in which the best of these poets came to root their vision in African modes of thought has given a new meaning to the traditional African world-view" (510) provides an impetus for further research into the concept of a unified identity. The far reach of his philosophy can also be backed up by Fanon's prediction in his work *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he stated, "for many black people dis-alienations will come into being through their refusal to accept the present as definitive" (Diagne 595). The portrayal of the present was romanticized and presented through the poetry of Senghor.

Senghor's poems are marked by a sense of "intense emotion of the idyllic Africa, black beauty, the harmony of the African universe, the invisible links common to all people who share the black sensitivity" (Mabana 4). These works of literature accurately suggest how initially native intellectuals would produce work to "be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether with the intention of charming him or of denouncing him through ethnic or subjectivist means, now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people" (Fanon 239). These themes and ideas enable a consideration of the multiple approaches various thinkers and leaders implemented to rebuild a lost and fragmented African identity. In order to understand the struggles, personal anecdotes, and intergenerational trauma faced by Blacks, interspersing Sartre and Senghor's works with these diverse experiences will further contextualize and paint a holistic picture of the impact and nature of Négritude.

However, while this was the aim of the movement, an array of counter-arguments have been presented by philosophers such as Frantz Fanon and Jean Paul Sartre, leading to new complexities in the movement.

Criticism of Négritude

Critics of Négritude argue that it cultivated a sense of "reactionary forms of racial identity and did not sufficiently address sociopolitical reality" (Clark 82). Fesuer outlines the

criticisms of numerous African writers on the Négritude movement. He first mentions “Sembene Ousmane, Africa’s greatest social writer, who believed Négritude... neither feeds the hungry nor builds roads” (560). This has been supported by various thinkers and writers, like Fanon, whose works will be analyzed later. Similarly the Cameroonian philosopher Marcien Towa in his work *Leopold Senghor: Négritude or Servitude* argues that “Senghor’s approach to Négritude was a reactionary movement and apologetic to neo-colonial culture and the imperial” (Clark 80). He argues that Senghor unknowingly reinforced Western prejudices instead of countering them, through his method of nursing past values such as “emotionalism” and “irrationalism” (81). This resonated with thoughts of a French writer who called Négritude “the intellectual pastime of the governing elite ” (Feuser 561). Cameroonian theologian Jean-Marc Ela adds to this, stating that “Négritude is a theory of the alienated bourgeois of Africa and has little to do with the masses” (81), as there were associated ‘pitfalls of Africanization’ (Clark 81). Some scholars have even gone to the extent of calling the fathers of Négritude “from being the cultural gurus of Africa and the Negro race they became the alienated victims of French brain-washing” (Feuser 561). According to Dr. Mezu, a renowned critic, “Senghor is not the pioneer of the Black Renaissance but the product of this movement” (Wolitz 79).

It’s important to scrutinize the political motivations behind politicians’ decisions and stances, as they had a definitive impact on the movement. The most prominent hypocrisy can be shown from the fact that most of the rebelling poets and writers assimilated themselves, thus alienating themselves from some social realities. This led to criticisms that their theories and assertions were artificial and hypocritical. For instance, “Senghor was born in Senegal but he got a scholarship from the colonial administration and left for France when he was only twenty-two and attended the Ecole Normale Supérieure where he met Georges Pompidou, who would later become the president of France. Additionally, Senghor went on to marry a white woman despite having exalted the Black woman in his poetry” (Galafa 294).

It is interesting to note that many of the Négritude writers were also politicians, which is suggestive of how “they had simply replaced the old colonizers with themselves, ready to pounce on their own people the same way colonialism had done” (297). This can be extended to Fanon’s theory of black skin, white masks, or “a reproduction of colonial culture by the new elites” (297). Mongo Beti condemned “Senghorian Négritude as a by-product of colonialism and sundry forms of oppression” (Fesuer 508). It is not important to merely acknowledge these criticisms, but also understand the broader sociopolitical situation, especially as it concerns Senghor, which has discussed in detail by scholars (Kestlelout and Kennedy 52). To counter these criticisms, Senghor’s statements provide a holistic understanding of his perspective: “Négritude will constitute, already constitutes... a set of new essential contributions. So, it will not disappear; it will play, again, its role, an essential one, in the erection of a new humanism, more humane” (Diagne 247). Many scholars have concuded Senghor does not constitute Négritude as “separated identities” but alludes to “the humanism of hybridity” (246).

One of the most popular criticisms of Négritude is by Wole Soyinka in his analogy of the tiger and its stripes. In order to study Sartre’s beliefs and contribution to Négritude, it is necessary to introduce Soyinka’s criticism and beliefs, as they both have humanist and existentialist convictions. Apart from this, it is also important to consider whether Soyinka or Sartre’s criticisms are valid considering their contrasting ethnic backgrounds. Interestingly, Soyinka is “averse to other philosophies that tend to make man a mere function of social forces, thus curtailing his freedom” (Fesuer 570), which contrasts Sartre’s perspective of Négritude functioning as a part of a larger class struggle.

According to July, Soyinka is outraged by “the unquestioning acceptance of these Eurocentric axioms by the proponents of Négritude. The end result may be an affirmation of African civilization, yet it comes... not innate but borrowed” (496). This becomes crucial, because even if the African civilization is affirmed, for whom is the created identity designed, and at what cost?

Gaps

There is abundant literature on Senghor’s principles on Négritude as a philosophy, and Césaire and Damas’ counter-arguments. Similarly, Sartre’s theories and ideas have been explored in detail. However, there seems to be a gap in establishing a relationship between the impact of Sartre’s “anti-racist racism” on Négritude’s success in creating an independent and authentic identity for contemporary Africans, as reflected in their poetry. Furthermore, there is a dearth of literature that studies the degree of validity and success of Sartre’s work on Négritude through the white gaze. This needs to be contextualized with work by Soyinka and Fanon because of their lived experiences of racial prejudice.

Objectives of Study

To answer the research question, to what extent does Sartre’s criticism of Négritude philosophy create a distinct identity for Africans?, it is important to approach it step by step, and through a sociocultural context. First it is necessary to explore the Négritude movement as a philosophy, as preached by Senghor. Next, to gain an insight into the crumbling psyche and politics of the fifties and sixties, I will study the thematic variations of Senghor’s poetry. Thirdly, it is also necessary to evaluate the legitimacy of Sartre’s criticism of Senghor’s version of Négritude through his work “Black Orpheus,” considered one of the most defining and influential works of the movement, while keeping in mind his identity as a white French citizen. Lastly, this will all culminate together to portray how the theme of Black identity has unfolded over the years.

This paper aims to provide a latent understanding of Jean Paul Sartre’s “*Black Orpheus*” and its implications on creating a collective Black identity in the African and pan-African community. While they have been considered critical for furthering the Négritude movement, previous studies point to how Sartre’s arguments can be problematic as they possess a Eurocentric bias, and have a lack of understanding of the struggles of the Black people. A textual analysis of “*Black Orpheus*” reveals that Sartre imposes his opinions, draws parallels with different struggles, and provides arguments that give a contemptuous outlook towards the efforts and principles of the movement. I will also analyze literary works by thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, and Wole Soyinka in order to contextualize Sartre’s study and to provide insight into what Négritude means as a philosophy.

Methodology

This paper will utilize a rhetorical, situational, and sociological approach. It will focus mainly on qualitative research, incorporating textual and discourse analysis. Research by Johnston asserts that, “discourse draws upon the conflicts, struggles, and divisions of the broader social, political, and cultural environment, and articulates these elements” (1). The overarching discourse of this time was Négritude, and will be used as the backdrop for the study. This

philosophy had themes of revolution, self-affirmation, and identity, which are present not only in the discourse as a whole, but at a micro level as well, in Senghor's poetry. Therefore, it becomes important to not only conduct an analysis of the form and content of his poetry, but to also place them in context of the movement. Since "discourse analysis looks at the textual production of a movement" (Johnston 1), I will analyze translations of Senghor's poems "Black Woman," "Prayer to Masks," and "Totem," among others. While this will set the tone for the gist of the movement and philosophy, work by Sartre, Fanon, and Soyinka will be read closely for their content and themes. This methodology will also allow for an evaluation of the ways in which discourse structures in these contexts impact social cognition of structures of knowledge (Dijk 3). Critical discourse analysis is a pertinent methodology here as it examines the forms and strategies of white-authored texts and discussion that create a highly subtle system of dominance with their attitudes and ideologies (Dijk 4). This is important considering this paper aims to study whether Sartre's theories and critiques use certain "topics, narratives structures, argumentation strategies, or subtle derogation of Others" (Dijk 4) to defend underlying ethnic or racial prejudices. This is crucial for Sartre's Eurocentric text, which has been considered an influential piece of work in Négritude. Discourse analysis helps identify texts that create sophisticated structures that partake in the expression of ethnic prejudices (Dijk 4). In another important text, *Understanding Critical Discourse Analysis in Qualitative Research*, the author noted that critical discourse analysis helped portray unspoken and unacknowledged aspects of hidden discourses that maintained marginalised positions in society (Mogashoa 111).

All these texts will serve as the primary sources for the study. For secondary sources, journal articles, author interviews, and research reviews will also be studied.

Analysis of Senghor's Poetry

While Senghor was one of the three founders of the movement, he pioneered it, and was at the forefront. His poems reveal the psyche of Francophone Africans under European colonization, and the ideas behind the roots of the Négritude movement. Here, I analyze *Prayer to Masks*, *Totem*, *Night in Sine*, and *Black Mask*, popular poems by Senghor which form part of the *Anthology of the New Negro and Malagasy Poetry*, one of the most influential works of the movement. Through his poems, Senghor creates rich imagery of the traditional African way of life and culture. These poems share an underlying yearning for a better future, after colonization, and an acceptance that his homeland has deteriorated physically and emotionally with the onset of colonization. Senghor constantly evokes the ancestors whose knowledge and wisdom the people of Africa need, as they "guard this place" (*Prayer to Masks*) and prevent "great depths of sleep" (*Night of Sine*). When he evokes this, he alludes to a past which is untainted by colonial intervention. He wants to do this by "[breathing] the odour of [the] Dead" (*Night of Sine*) to pay heed to those "who gave their lives" (*Prayer to Masks*) during colonization. There is a vivid imagery that alludes to Mother Nature that is ever present within the African spirit. The sand, green palm, coffee, cotton, oil, soil, lightning, and thunder are not only the essence of African surroundings, but also form a part of African identity. Senghor employs this imagery in such a way in order to express indigenous African culture. The idea of rhythm is repeated, as he desires to "teach the world rhythm" and to give "memory of life" to "men torn with hope" (*Prayer to Masks*). However, a more deep-seated analysis suggests that Senghor reiterates the stereotypes and materialistic resources that Africans were reduced to, by Europeans. For instance, he continuously mentions music and dance as an important cultural aspect. In addition, Senghor

hints at sexism when he states that the ancestral place is “closed to feminine laughter” (*Prayer to Masks*). Similarly, in “Black Mask,” the female body is sexualised and used as a metaphor for the physical landscape of Africa. This can be observed through descriptions such as “darker lip,” “closed eyelids,” “head of perfect bronze,” and “tender neck.”

However, on the whole, themes in Senghor’s poetry point towards a revolution brewing amongst the intellectuals, as there are repetitive mentions of returning to their native roots and freeing themselves from the shackles of oppression. These poems portray an evolution of the mindset of the leaders of that time, which they wished to disseminate by creating a national consciousness. This came about as the social and psychological lens they used to perceive and interact with their environment changed as a sense of unification emerged. As Fanon states, these poems address the people and create a call to action for reclaiming their identity. The *Anthology of the New Negro and Malagasy Poetry* was an important work as it brought to light the various literature of the Négritude movement, making it available to the masses. However, Sartre’s preface to the *Anthology* is a renowned work in its own right, titled “*Black Orpheus*.” While it is considered crucial in defining the movement, there has been a fair amount of criticism in putting it on a pedestal. After establishing the essence of the Négritude movement, I will evaluate “Black Orpheus” to argue that not only was Sartre’s text unidimensional and ignorant, but also that his latent prejudices created a central trope through which the movement came to be viewed.

Decoding Sartre’s “*Black Orpheus*”

A key argument in this paper is the nature of the commentary on the Négritude movement and its poetry, by Sartre. There is no doubt that Sartre’s intention was to uplift the movement and its principles. However, his work comes across as unsympathetic towards the struggles of Black peoples and their attempt to address prejudices against them as a means of empowerment. Sartre is searching for “definitions” and wants Négritude to be a “describable concept” (Sartre 24), ultimately stating that Black poets do not “hit the target of their message” and “express Négritude precisely” (24). Furthermore, a central idea by Sartre is that Black men must become conscious of their black skin before creating a revolution (19). In Senghor’s poems, there is an acceptance of Black heritage, and even a certain romanticization of black skin, expressed as pride. For instance, this can clearly be observed in his poem “Black Woman” where he lovingly calls the “Naked woman, black woman, / Clothed with your colour which is life.”

What is the value of Sartre’s central contribution to Négritude, as a founder of the movement and one of its most influential politicians and poets, although he evidenced these prejudices? While it is a valid argument that the recognition, and not ignorance, of one’s cultural heritage and biological differences will lead to more awareness and acceptance of one’s differences, Sartre’s argument does not accord with this idea. This is because Senghor’s poems are already bridging that gap, and as a prominent figure of the revolution, citizens and other revolutionaries regarded him as an authoritative figure. While Sartre’s point that Négritude is not “[the Negro’s] knowing, but the process of discovering and becoming what he is” (29), is compelling, denying one’s racial traits is not a characteristic of the movement in the first place. Sartre’s call for racial consciousness amongst “Negroes” becomes a colonial trope and assigns a Black identity which becomes the central symbol of the movement. It can be argued that this is the heart of Négritude; to bring forth the voices of Blacks, as they subvert the racial prejudice they have faced for centuries. However, Sartre’s points focus on reinforcing the differences between races instead of placing the same degree of importance on the existence of the Other as

there is on European subjects. On the contrary, when Fanon does this, he affirms that “passivity, aggressiveness and attitudes are present in students, workers and pimps;” he places everyone on the same pedestal, unlike Sartre who emphasises difference. In addition, Sartre deviates from the issue of racial discrimination to focus on class conflicts in Europe.

Sartre’s study of masses and working-class struggles is a critical aspect of his political philosophy. In "Black Orpheus," Sartre centers a large fraction of his discussion on Négritude around the conflict between the white bourgeois and the proletariat. For a majority of the first half of the book, he discusses why the white worker cannot revolt through the means of poetry, thus turning away from the topic at hand. It is important to note that towards the end of "Black Orpheus," Sartre explicitly mentions that race and class “don’t mix” as “race is concrete and particular and a product of psycho-biological syncretism” while class is “universal and abstract” and a “methodic construction starting with experience” (49). However, throughout the book, he draws on the idea of the white proletariat struggle to justify how consciousness needs to be established at a larger scale to bring about social change. However, coming from a white Eurocentric background, his position is that of a supremacist. Despite his claim that race and class cannot be compared as an attempt to justify his work on Négritude, Sartre contradicts himself. It can thus be said that, “the basis of this juxtaposition between the objective proletariat position and the particular/subjective position of Négritude is that the notion of the proletariat alone is capable of ensuring the solidarity of all oppressed persons” (Paquette 21). Therefore, “Sartre is quick to agree that it is important to abolish racism; however, it is only for the purpose of providing the conditions for the unity of class struggle” (21). This paves the way for concluding that Négritude does not have value in itself when it stands alone, and merely paves way for the proletariat revolution (23). This claim creates inherent discrepancies in the movement according to Sartre.

Sartre talks about how “the attempt to conceptualize Négritude’s various aspects would show its relativity” (51), but in "Black Orpheus," he does exactly that. Throughout the work, Sartre points out the inherent contradictions and opposing ideologies that constitute the Négritude movement. Sartre even goes as far as saying that “Négritude becomes a universal struggle” (48). This is a logical argument in the sense that Europeans assimilated Black peoples under the guise of brotherhood. Drawing from Senghor’s poetry, the movement is not intended to be “objective, positive, precise” (48) as Sartre claims. The visual imagery which paints a picture of the dying cultural roots of African identity in Senghor’s *Night of Sine* is not precise or objective. It depicts a slowly crumbling existence, faced by people at different social strata to different degrees—not a uniform, but a varied experience. On the other hand, Sartre’s entire work places the racial tones of the movement within the larger class struggles in Europe. The constant back and forth between race and class conflicts leads to Sartre commenting on the poems presented in the *Anthology* to further his argument.

Sartre’s analyses of the poems have a constant reference to the myths, traditions and surrealism in African culture. It seems unclear whether Sartre means to praise the culturally rooted Black man, or if he wants him to let go of them, so that “Négritude can move forward” (30). To counter this, Fanon looks at the larger overarching issue, and states that the “educated Negro is a slave of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro myth, and feels his race no longer understands him or that he does not understand it, and this attitude makes him renounce the present and the future, in the name of a mystical past” (Fanon 7). It is interesting to note that Senghor, as a father of the movement, tries to evoke this mystical past through his poetry.

While criticisms and constructive analyses can be made of Négritude poetry, Sartre's criticisms impose themselves as they originate from an affluent Eurocentric perspective. Sartre erases the racial specificity of the Négritude movement in favor of a more Eurocentric focus on class difference. This leads to an undermining of the Black poetic experience, which can only be studied by studying works by poets of color themselves. To further delve into this idea, Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, constantly draws upon his personal experiences and those of Césaire, and to help the readers understand the prejudice faced by them. This is a more fruitful way to paint a grim picture of the racism and loss of identity faced by the Black subject, showing the complex layers of the Négritude movement. This raises the concern of whether "memory should be a sacrifice of time" (Soyinka 104) and "where the duty of the poet lies" in terms of the "material of memory, which holds sway in the iniquitous present" (104).

Soyinka's question forces us to first examine the function of Senghor's position and his use of historical memory in his poetry. It is only after deconstructing the effect on and responsibility of Senghor's literature to the masses that one can evaluate Sartre's critique. Senghor's poetry stirred a sociopolitical revolution, using the literary imagination and tools as his weapons to re-create and disseminate the historic past. Historical memory plays an important role, as the lived experiences of slavery and colonization need to be brought in the spotlight by poets to make their stories known. Soyinka termed Senghor, Césaire, and Diop's works as "abstract preoccupations" (180), and saw Négritude as a movement "beyond the rhetorical stage and one that sought answers" (181). These worries about the role of a poet in a movement stem from Soyinka's work where he states, "Senghor the politician, and Senghor the poet and scholar...these divisions were merely convenient categories" (94). As explored in my analysis of Senghor's poems in the previous section, the latent reinforcement of their cultural identity is made to spearhead Négritude. Additionally, Soyinka raises an important question, as thinkers like David Hume asserted that Black intellectuals had not contributed anything to the world, "What did the poets of Négritude claim and establish to negate the claim that the Black man didn't contribute to world culture?" (169). He reiterated this by declaring that Négritude was a trap and that it "summons to something worse than a paradisiac idyll, a state of infantile regression" (168). This suggests that they did not realize they were subjects caught in colonialism themselves, but were happy simply to form part of French national identity, or "they did not question the validity or contradiction to their mission of race retrieval" (146). This absence of a focus on the intellectual capabilities of Africa in Senghor's poetry, also resonates with Sartre's arguments in *"Black Orpheus"*.

Sartre's call for racial consciousness amongst Blacks ultimately becomes a colonial trope. It can be argued that recognizing this as the heart of Négritude is what the movement aims to do; to bring the voices of Blacks to be heard, as they subvert the racial prejudice they have faced for centuries. However, Sartre reinforces dangerous colonial binaries in his work (Alaigh 1). According to Fanon, the "juxtaposition of white and black races has created a massive psycho-existential complex" (Fanon 4). However, Sartre focuses on constructing race along a hierarchy, instead of preaching that the 'Other' is as important as Europe. This creates a stark division between the existence of Blacks and Europeans, which Sartre justifies using an existentialist approach.

Throughout *"Black Orpheus,"* Sartre constantly refers to Being, alluding to his previous work, *Being and Nothingness*. However, this displaces focus from the study of Négritude to Sartre's previous existential philosophy. Being does not come into play in the Négritude movement; it is a separate philosophical idea. Can Sartre's ideas of two kinds of consciousness

and two types of being, practically, psychologically impact and improve the Black subject's condition in a colonized world? Fanon's approach to understanding the colonized man's dilemma stems from a humanistic approach. To further explore the point that Sartre forces his existential philosophy on the Black man as to arouse race consciousness, Fanon states the same argument when he states that, "Whites and Europeans forced an existential deviation on the Negro" (6). This illustrates that even Fanon agrees that existentialist philosophy is not the main agenda.

Sartre states that "the Negro does not wish to dominate the world, he desires the abolition of all kinds of ethnic privileges, he asserts solidarity with the oppressed of every colour. After this, the subjective, existential ethnic notion of Négritude passes" (Sartre 48). However, Sartre is the only one who adds an existential tangent to the movement. It seems as if "Black Orpheus" is Sartre's study into whether or not the Négritude movement aligns with his notions of Being and existentialist philosophy. Sartre furthers his philosophy by stating that "Négritude with its Past and Future becomes a part of Universal History" (48), and while this is important in highlighting racial differences, Sartre still does not perceive the existence of Black people on humanitarian grounds. He goes on to add that "it is not a state or existential attitude but a Becoming" (48). Later, he explores Négritude as an amalgamation of "an existential attitude and sometimes the objective ensemble" (48). These contradictory definitions continue throughout the book, and even lead to contradictions in the philosophical roots of the movement.

Sartre's conclusion that "Négritude is for destroying itself, it is a crossing to, and not an arrival at" (49) implies that he is still attempting to categorize a movement. Furthermore, he believes that since there is no end goal or destination of the movement, it is nullified. Even if Négritude is a means to an end, it does not become self-destructive: "Sartre culled images of the primitive from the texts of the Négritude poets in order to describe what he viewed as their own project: to negate a certain white modernity. Sartre certainly was guilty of a certain primitivism—that is, of assigning a positive value to characteristics called primitive—it seems wrong to say that Sartre had fallen into a kind of trap here, however unintentionally" (Arthur 39). This brings to light how the "first impulse of the Black man is to say no to those who attempt to build a definition of him, the first action of a Black man is a reaction" (Fanon 23), eventually birthing Négritude. A movement that aims to create an identity once described as aiming at "destroying itself" by a member of the colonizers' race not only devalues its essence, but also is a form of ideological colonization.

Additionally, there is a certain degree of romanticization of the struggle of Blacks. This can be observed in statements such as: "Négritude adorns itself in a tragic beauty that finds expression only in poetry" (51). This use of the phrase "tragic beauty" suggests that the plight of Africans has a certain allure to it, disregarding that even before colonization, Africa saw the horrors of slavery. There is nothing romantic or glamorous attached to the history of Africa; the continent is still recovering from the decades of physical and emotional torture to which it was subjected. Today Africa has become a "contentious object of contemplation" (Soyinka 145). The gist of "Black Orpheus" can be summarized well with the following statements by Fanon, "Anyone can amass quotes to prove that colour prejudice is indeed an imbecility and in iniquity that must be eliminated" (Fanon 19). He further adds that, "a white man with a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child, and starts smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening" (19). This is exactly what Sartre's arguments imply. Soyinka further adds that "according to Europeans, the Black man is my brother, but a junior one... he is simple minded like a child... any complex phenomena elude him" (Soyinka 168). This conditioning has led to an inferiority

complex where the “reason for the strife of contemporary Negroes is to prove the existence of a Black civilization to the white world at all costs” (Fanon 22). Diagne supports this, arguing that:

“The paradox of Sartre’s preface to the *Anthology* by Senghor is that in many respects the Négritude movement had, after *Black Orpheus*, to define itself against Sartre’s positioning of its philosophical meaning. It did so (1) by insisting that it was not a mere particularism defined as the *antithesis* to a white supremacist view (with black self-affirmation using the figure of inversion that Sartre characterized as an anti-racist racism before some dialectical post-racial *synthesis*; (2) by showing that there was something substantial (and not just poetic) in the reference to African values of civilization by which Senghor had defined Négritude: that Négritude was indeed an ontology, an epistemology, an aesthetics and a politics” (Diagne 1).

This quote provides a justification of the need for Négritude. Fanon’s aim was to “help the Black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that had developed by the colonial environment” (19). However, this can only be achieved through empathizing with the victims of that time, in this case Fanon. Sartre’s scope for contribution and emancipation from colonial reigns is not only not inapplicable, but is also of no value because he is a part of the oppressor group. Despite studying his work with the assumption that he wanted to liberate Blacks from the chains of colonialism, his work comes across as unfeeling.

This lack of empathy can be observed through the style and format of the work between Sartre and Fanon. A cursory comparison of *Black Orpheus* and *Black Skin, White Masks* reveals a phenomenal difference in the writing style and argumentative method. Fanon undertakes a psychological analysis (4), and at the same time states the limitations of his study, so as to not have generalizations drawn from his work. On the other hand, Sartre’s statements, like the “rather ugly term Négritude” indicate a judgement on his part; one that is unrequired and futile to be written about, while larger issues still loom large (Sartre 24).

In a final inquiry, Fanon infers that *Black Orpheus* “fails to contribute to black struggles against racism, it actually hinders them” (137),

“When I read [a particular passage of *Black Orpheus*], I felt that I had been robbed of my last chance. I said to my friends, 'The generation of the younger black poets has just suffered a blow that can never be forgiven'. Orphee Noir is a date in the intellectualisation of the experience of being black. And Sartre's mistake was not only to seek the source of the source but in a certain sense to block that source ... Jean-Paul Sartre, in this work, has destroyed black zeal” (Storr 137).

Through the excerpt above, Fanon aims to critique the “pattern of immanence and transcendence” by Sartre, as he refers to Négritude “as a term that is to be transcended and surpassed as history progresses towards the abolition of all racial categories as such” (Storr 138). While these thinkers debated the definitions and parameters of Négritude, language is another aspect that created rifts between the various interpretations of the movement.

The Language Debate

While looking at the various facets of the movement, it is also crucial to note the interplay of its complexities. The foundation of Négritude is built on language politics. Sartre's "Black Orpheus" is part of the linguistic system that allowed Sartre's opinion to be put forth in the first place, because Négritude was born in Francophone Africa and from the African diaspora.

However, Soyinka believes that "language is not everything" (Soyinka 155), and extends that as a justification for the cultural resistance in Anglophone territories. He also points out the irony in this situation. Césaire and Senghor, who studied in France, had a globalized outlook, and were elected as Black representatives in the French assembly. According to Soyinka, he or his ancestors would not even be considered for elections. This shows the hypocrisy of the colonizers, and their veiled tactics to assimilate Black people. This is why for a lot of the thinkers of the movement, "anything that came from the other world was to be discarded, especially language" (Soyinka 156). The reality was that when an assimilated Black man would return home, he had adopted French as his primary language, suggesting that he "was desperate to learn diction, to fit in with the language in France" (Fanon 10). According to Fanon, "it is done because of his inferiority complex, to feel at par with Europeans and their achievements" (14), which supports Soyinka's claim that the primary goal of a contemporary Black man is to prove the worthiness of his existence. He speaks French as "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (25).

These arguments paint a picture of the tumultuous language politics at the time. Further adding on to this, Sartre's arguments on language centre around supremacy and almost reek of ignorance. He argues that French is an inadequate language for the Black man to represent his struggles, and the movement's poets misconstrue their poetry because they use French.

By declaring that "giving language to the Negro also gives rights over him" (Sartre 26), Sartre almost invalidates the entirety of his argument in "Black Orpheus," where he attempts to decode the nature and themes of Négritude poetry. This is a problematic statement when it comes to the debate about the language for literature. Fanon, on the other hand, raises more practical and experience based issues with the language spoken by Black people. Fanon's counter to Sartre's claim that French cannot capture an African struggle and historical trauma is that "the European has a fixed concept of the Negro, and there is nothing more exasperating than to be asked- How long have you been in France? You speak French so well" (Fanon 23). This frustration is further contextualised when Césaire describes how the memory of Africa still remembers the wounds and permanent scars of colonization and "can be measured in the retardation of social existence against the visible prosperity of the other on a shared planet" (Soyinka 185).

The language debate in Négritude shaped the movement. An overarching study shows that between Césaire and Senghor, the former has a more rational and definitive stance on the representation of the Black man. Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to Native Land*, explores the metaphor of masks, like Senghor does, and searches to define himself and his cultural identity. Unlike Sartre, though Césaire looks for the meaning of Négritude, like Soyinka, he concludes that to create his own identity, he must first accept the brutal history and memory of slavery, colonization and poverty. This is observed when the narrator solemnly exclaims, "the determination of my biology...measured by the compass of suffering...I accept, I accept it all" (Césaire 50). Through a journey of seeking, he reveals that "Négritude is more than a simple state, concept or theory—it is an action pertaining to intense self-analysis and redefinition" (Baker 1). The last lines of the poem are, "I follow you who are imprinted on my ancestral white cornea/ rise sky licker/ and the great black hole where a moon ago I wanted to drown/ it is there I

will now fish the malevolent tongue of the night” (Césaire 57). The language used by Césaire uses imagery as well, but unlike Senghor’s literature, it does not provide airy claims and images of romanticized trauma. These lines show a newfound hope and determination instilled in Black culture, and the desire for a better and self-made future. Césaire’s work has a certain “negation of racial stereotypes constructed within an anti-Black society, and the consciousness raising of the imposition of these stereotypes; his project seeks to understand how the negation of negative stereotypes can be liberatory” (Paquette 14).

This approach aligns with Soyinka’s framework for viewing Négritude. Contrary to Sartre’s attempt for a concretised definition of Négritude, Soyinka provides a framework for understanding the context and importance of the movement. This is asserted through defining Négritude through the “totality of [his] image”; the Black man’s image. The world created by the self-proclaimed superiors of the world couldn’t have existed without his denigrated presence” (Soyinka 182).

Conclusion

This study has provided for a new lens through which the critique of Négritude can be viewed. It has explored the ways in which prejudices in literature by Eurocentric thinkers on a Black centric ideology and movement can hide under the garb of promoting them. This is achieved through layered arguments, a false sense of recognition, and creating false parallels to express empathy. Sartre’s commentary in "Black Orpheus" contains an ignorant “presumption of the homogeneity of all Black people without any recognition of different languages, cultures, religions, and histories existing in Africa prior to slavery” (Paquette 21). Instead of subverting the paradigm, he falls into the same trap as the colonizers. Fanon and Soyinka articulate that Black history and identity cannot be underpinned or understood through reference to other social issues, such as the class struggle in this case. Sartre’s "Black Orpheus" constructs an identity for Black people that is carved through the white gaze and colonial psyche. A latent investigation of Senghor’s poetry in the *Anthology of the New Negro and Malagasy poetry* unveils the underlying romanticization and essentialism assigned to traditional culture and history. This aligns with Sartre’s homogenous perspective of Africa and its diaspora. While "Black Orpheus" has some critical points about *Anthology*, it cannot be seen as the fundamental piece of literature which defines Négritude. If anything, it has the same pitfalls as any work written on a social movement in the Other through a Eurocentric perspective. Even today, Césaire’s lines echo through the fragmented and healing identity of contemporary Africa and its diaspora: “no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength and there is room for everyone at the convocation of conquest” (Césaire 50).

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